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MENU

The Red House Mystery by A. A. Milne

Guests at the Red House were allowed to do what they liked within reason–the reasonableness or otherwise of it being decided by Mark.

Red House

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Writer: A. A. Milne

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The Red House Mystery *is a whodunnit by A. A. Milne, published in 1922. It was Milne's only mystery novel (except for Four Days Wonder).*

TO
JOHN VINE MILNE
MY DEAR FATHER,

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you is to write you one. Here it is: with more gratitude and affection than I can well put down here.

A.A.M.

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CHAPTER I. MRS. STEVENS IS FRIGHTENED

In the drowsy heat of the summer afternoon the Red House was taking its siesta. There was a lazy murmur of bees in the flower-borders, a gentle cooing of pigeons in the tops of the elms. From distant lawns came the whir of a mowing-machine, that most restful of all country sounds; making ease the sweeter in that it is taken while others are working.

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pretty parlour-maid, re-trimmed her best hat, and talked idly to her aunt, the cook-housekeeper of Mr. Mark Ablett's bachelor home.

"For Joe?" said Mrs. Stevens placidly, her eye on the hat. Audrey nodded. She took a pin from her mouth, found a place in the hat for it, and said, "He likes a bit of pink."

"I don't say I mind a bit of pink myself," said her aunt. "Joe Turner isn't the only one."

"It isn't everybody's colour," said Audrey, holding the hat out at arm's length, and regarding it thoughtfully. "Stylish, isn't it?"

"Oh, it'll suit you all right, and it would have suited me at your age. A bit too dressy for me now, though wearing better than some other people, I daresay. I was never the one to pretend to be what I wasn't. If I'm fifty-five, I'm fifty-five –that's what I say."

"Fifty-eight, isn't it, auntie?"

"I was just giving that as an example," said Mrs. Stevens with great dignity.

Audrey threaded a needle, held her hand out and looked at her nails critically for a moment, and then began to sew.

"Funny thing that about Mr. Mark's brother. Fancy not seeing your brother for fifteen years." She gave a self-conscious laugh and went on, "Wonder what I should do if I didn't see Joe for fifteen years."

"As I told you all this morning," said her aunt, "I've been here five years, and never heard of a brother. I could say that before everybody if I was going to die to-morrow. There's been no brother here while I've been here."

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when he spoke about him at breakfast this morning. I didn't hear what went before, naturally, but they was all talking about the brother when I went in–now what was it I went in for–hot milk, was it, or toast?–well, they was all talking, and Mr. Mark turns to me, and says–you know his way–'Stevens,' he says, 'my brother is coming to see me this afternoon; I'm expecting him about three,' he says. 'Show him into the office,' he says, just like that. 'Yes, sir,' I says quite quietly, but I was never so surprised in my life, not knowing he had a brother. 'My brother from Australia,' he says–there, I'd forgotten that. From Australia."

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here, and that's five years."

"Well, but, auntie, he hasn't been here for fifteen years. I heard Mr. Mark telling Mr. Cayley. 'Fifteen years,' he says. Mr. Cayley having arst him when his brother was last in England. Mr. Cayley knew of him, I heard him telling Mr. Beverley, but didn't know when he was last in England–see? So that's why he arst Mr. Mark."

"I'm not saying anything about fifteen years, Audrey. I can only speak for what I know, and that's five years Whitsuntide. I can take my oath he's not set foot in the house since five years Whitsuntide. And if he's been in Australia, as you say, well, I daresay he's had his reasons."

"What reasons?" said Audrey lightly.

"Never mind what reasons. Being in the place of a mother to you, since your poor mother died, I say this, Audrey–when a gentleman goes to Australia, he has his reasons. And when he stays in Australia fifteen years, as Mr. Mark says, and as I know for myself for five years, he has his reasons. And a respectably brought-up girl doesn't ask what reasons."

"Got into trouble, I suppose," said Audrey carelessly. "They were saying at breakfast he'd been a wild one. Debts. I'm glad Joe isn't like that. He's got fifteen pounds in the post-office savings' bank. Did I tell you?"

But there was not to be any more talk of Joe Turner that afternoon. The ringing of a bell brought Audrey to her feet–no longer Audrey, but now Stevens. She arranged her cap in front of the glass.

"There, that's the front door," she said. "That's him. 'Show him into the office,' said Mr. Mark. I suppose he doesn't want the other ladies and gentlemen to see him. Well, they're all out at their golf, anyhow–Wonder if he's going to stay–P'raps he's brought back a lot of gold from Australia–I might hear something about Australia, because if anybody can get gold there, then I don't say but what Joe and I–"

"Now, now, get on, Audrey."

"Just going, darling." She went out.

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It was a big low-roofed, oak-beamed place, with cream-washed walls and diamond-paned windows, blue-curtained. On the right and left were doors leading into other living-rooms, but on the side which faced you as you came in were windows again, looking on to a small grass court, and from open windows to open windows such air as there was played gently. The staircase went up in broad, low steps along the right-hand wall, and, turning to the left, led you along a gallery, which ran across the width of the hail, to your bedroom. That is, if you were going to stay the night. Mr. Robert Ablett's intentions in this matter were as yet unknown.

As Audrey came across the hall she gave a little start as she saw Mr. Cayley suddenly, sitting unobtrusively in a seat beneath one of the front windows, reading. No reason why he shouldn't be there; certainly a much cooler place than the golf-links on such a day; but somehow there was a deserted air about the house that afternoon, as if all the guests were outside, or–perhaps the wisest place of all–up in their bedrooms, sleeping. Mr. Cayley, the master's cousin, was a surprise; and, having given a little exclamation as she came suddenly upon him, she blushed, and said, "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't see you at first," and he looked up from his book and smiled at her. An attractive smile it was on that big ugly face. "Such a gentleman, Mr. Cayley," she thought to herself as she went on, and wondered what the master would do without him. If this brother, for instance, had to be bundled back to Australia, it was Mr. Cayley who would do most of the bundling.

"So this is Mr. Robert," said Audrey to herself, as she came in sight of the visitor.

She told her aunt afterwards that she would have known him anywhere for Mr. Mark's brother, but she would have said that in any event. Actually she was surprised. Dapper little Mark, with his neat pointed beard and his carefully curled moustache; with his quick-darting eyes, always moving from one to the other of any company he was in, to register one more smile to his credit when he had said a good thing, one more expectant look when he was only waiting his turn to say it; he was a very different man from this rough-looking, ill-dressed colonial, staring at her so loweringly.

"I want to see Mr. Mark Ablett," he growled. It sounded almost like a threat.

Audrey recovered herself and smiled reassuringly at him. She had a smile for everybody.

"Yes, sir. He is expecting you, if you will come this way."

"Oh! So you know who I am, eh?"

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“Ay, that’s right. So he’s expecting me, eh? He’ll be glad to see me, eh?”

“If you will come this way, sir,” said Audrey primly.

She went to the second door on the left, and opened it.

“Mr. Robert Ab–she began, and then broke off. The room was empty. She turned to the man behind her. “If you will sit down, sir, I will find the master. I know he’s in, because he told me that you were coming this afternoon.”

“Oh!” He looked round the room. “What d’you call this place, eh?”

“The office, sir.”

“The office?”

“The room where the master works, sir.”

“Works, eh? That’s new. Didn’t know he’d ever done a stroke of work in his life.”

“Where he writes, sir,” said Audrey, with dignity. The fact that Mr. Mark “wrote,” though nobody knew what, was a matter of pride in the housekeeper’s room.

“Not well-dressed enough for the drawing-room, eh?”

“I will tell the master you are here, sir,” said Audrey decisively.

She closed the door and left him there.

Well! Here was something to tell auntie! Her mind was busy at once, going over all the things which he had said to her and she had said to him–quiet-like. “Directly I saw him I said to myself–” Why, you could have knocked her over with a feather. Feathers, indeed, were a perpetual menace to Audrey.

However, the immediate business was to find the master. She walked across the hall to the library, glanced in, came back a little uncertainly, and stood in front of Cayley.

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“What?” said Cayley, looking up from his book. “Who?”

Audrey repeated her question.

“I don’t know. Isn’t he in the office? He went up to the Temple after lunch. I don’t think I’ve seen him since.”

“Thank you, sir. I will go up to the Temple.”

Cayley returned to his book.

The “Temple” was a brick summer-house, in the gardens at the back of the house, about three hundred yards away. Here Mark meditated sometimes before retiring to the “office” to put his thoughts upon paper. The thoughts were not of any great value; moreover, they were given off at the dinner-table more often than they got on to paper, and got on to paper more often than they got into print. But that did not prevent the master of The Red House from being a little pained when a visitor treated the Temple carelessly, as if it had been erected for the ordinary purposes of flirtation and cigarette-smoking. There had been an occasion when two of his guests had been found playing fives in it. Mark had said nothing at the time, save to ask with a little less than his usual point–whether they couldn’t find anywhere else for their game, but the offenders were never asked to The Red House again.

Audrey walked slowly up to the Temple, looked in and walked slowly back. All that walk for nothing. Perhaps the master was upstairs in his room. “Not well-dressed enough for the drawing-room.” Well, now, Auntie, would you like anyone in your drawing-room with a red handkerchief round his neck and great big dusty boots, and–listen! One of the men shooting rabbits. Auntie was partial to a nice rabbit, and onion sauce. How hot it was; she wouldn’t say no to a cup of tea. Well, one thing, Mr. Robert wasn’t staying the night; he hadn’t any luggage. Of course Mr. Mark could lend him things; he had clothes enough for six. She would have known him anywhere for Mr. Mark’s brother.

She came into the house. As she passed the housekeeper’s room on her way to the hall, the door opened suddenly, and a rather frightened face looked out.

“Hallo, Aud,” said Elsie. “It’s Audrey,” she said, turning into the room.

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“What’s up?” said Audrey, looking in at the door.

“Oh, my dear, you gave me such a turn. Where have you been?”

“Up to the Temple.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Hear what?”

“Bangs and explosions and terrible things.”

“Oh!” said Audrey, rather relieved. “One of the men shooting rabbits. Why, I said to myself as I came along, ‘Auntie’s partial to a nice rabbit,’ I said, and I shouldn’t be surprised if–“

“Rabbits!” said her aunt scornfully. “It was inside the house, my girl.”

“Straight it was,” said Elsie. She was one of the housemaids. “I said to Mrs. Stevens–didn’t I, Mrs. Stevens?–‘That was in the house,’ I said.”

Audrey looked at her aunt and then at Elsie.

“Do you think he had a revolver with him?” she said in a hushed voice.

“Who?” said Elsie excitedly.

“That brother of his. From Australia. I said as soon as I set eyes on him, ‘You’re a bad lot, my man!’ That’s what I said, Elsie. Even before he spoke to me. Rude!” She turned to her aunt. “Well, I give you my word.”

“If you remember, Audrey, I always said there was no saying with anyone from Australia.” Mrs. Stevens lay back in her chair, breathing rather rapidly. “I wouldn’t go out of this room now, not if you paid me a hundred thousand pounds.”

“Oh, Mrs. Stevens!” said Elsie, who badly wanted five shillings for a new pair of shoes, “I wouldn’t go as far as that, not myself, but–“

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A door was being shaken, kicked, rattled.

“Listen!”

Audrey and Elsie looked at each other with frightened eyes.

They heard a man’s voice, loud, angry.

“Open the door!” it was shouting. “Open the door! I say, open the door!”

“Don’t open the door!” cried Mrs. Stevens in a panic, as if it was her door which was threatened. “Audrey! Elsie! Don’t let him in!”

“Damn it, open the door!” came the voice again.

“We’re all going to be murdered in our beds,” she quavered. Terrified, the two girls huddled closer, and with an arm round each, Mrs. Stevens sat there, waiting.

CHAPTER II. MR. GILLINGHAM GETS OUT AT THE WRONG STATION

Whether Mark Ablett was a bore or not depended on the point of view, but it may be said at once that he never bored his company on the subject of his early life. However, stories get about. There is always somebody who knows. It was understood–and this, anyhow, on Mark’s own authority–that his father had been a country clergyman. It was said that, as a boy, Mark had attracted the notice, and patronage, of some rich old spinster of the neighbourhood, who had paid for his education, both at school and university. At about the time when he was coming down from Cambridge, his father had died; leaving behind him a few debts, as a warning to his family, and a reputation for short sermons, as an example to his successor. Neither warning nor example seems to have been effective. Mark went to London, with an allowance from his patron, and (it is generally agreed) made acquaintance with the money-lenders. He was supposed, by his patron and any others who inquired, to be “writing”; but what he wrote, other than letters asking for more time to pay, has never been discovered. However, he attended the theatres and music halls very regularly–no doubt with a view to some serious articles in the “Spectator” on the decadence of the English stage.

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character, and becomes more a matter of history. He settled accounts with the money-lenders, abandoned his crop of wild oats to the harvesting of others, and became in his turn a patron. He patronized the Arts. It was not only usurers who discovered that Mark Ablett no longer wrote for money; editors were now offered free contributions as well as free lunches; publishers were given agreements for an occasional slender volume, in which the author paid all expenses and waived all royalties; promising young painters and poets dined with him; and he even took a theatrical company on tour, playing host and "lead" with equal lavishness.

He was not what most people call a snob. A snob has been defined carelessly as a man who loves a lord; and, more carefully, as a mean lover of mean things–which would be a little unkind to the peerage if the first definition were true. Mark had his vanities undoubtedly, but he would sooner have met an actor-manager than an earl; he would have spoken of his friendship with Dante–had that been possible–more glibly than of his friendship with the Duke. Call him a snob if you like, but not the worst kind of snob; a hanger-on, but to the skirts of Art, not Society; a climber, but in the neighbourhood of Parnassus, not Hay Hill.

His patronage did not stop at the Arts. It also included Matthew Cayley, a small cousin of thirteen, whose circumstances were as limited as had been Mark's own before his patron had rescued him. He sent the Cayley cousin to school and Cambridge. His motives, no doubt, were unworldly enough at first; a mere repaying to his account in the Recording Angel's book of the generosity which had been lavished on himself; a laying-up of treasure in heaven. But it is probable that, as the boy grew up, Mark's designs for his future were based on his own interests as much as those of his cousin, and that a suitably educated Matthew Cayley of twenty-three was felt by him to be a useful property for a man in his position; a man, that is to say, whose vanities left him so little time for his affairs.

Cayley, then, at twenty-three, looked after his cousin's affairs. By this time Mark had bought The Red House and the considerable amount of land which went with it. Cayley superintended the necessary staff. His duties, indeed, were many. He was not quite secretary, not quite land-agent, not quite business-adviser, not quite companion, but something of all four. Mark leant upon him and called him "Cay," objecting quite rightly in the circumstances to the name of Matthew. Cay, he felt was, above all, dependable; a big, heavy-jawed, solid fellow, who didn't bother you with unnecessary talk–a boon to a man who liked to do most of the talking himself.

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preference–call it kindliness or vanity, as you please–was for guests who were not in a position to repay his hospitality. Let us have a look at them as they came down to that breakfast, of which Stevens, the parlour-maid, has already given us a glimpse.

The first to appear was Major Rumbold, a tall, grey-haired, grey-moustached, silent man, wearing a Norfolk coat and grey flannel trousers, who lived on his retired pay and wrote natural history articles for the papers. He inspected the dishes on the side-table, decided carefully on kedgeree, and got to work on it. He had passed on to a sausage by the time of the next arrival. This was Bill Beverly, a cheerful young man in white flannel trousers and a blazer.

“Hallo, Major,” he said as he came in, “how’s the gout?”

“It isn’t gout,” said the Major gruffly.

“Well, whatever it is.”

The Major grunted.

“I make a point of being polite at breakfast,” said Bill, helping himself largely to porridge. “Most people are so rude. That’s why I asked you. But don’t tell me if it’s a secret. Coffee?” he added, as he poured himself out a cup.

“No, thanks. I never drink till I’ve finished eating.”

“Quite right, Major; it’s only manners.” He sat down opposite to the other. “Well, we’ve got a good day for our game. It’s going to be dashed hot, but that’s where Betty and I score. On the fifth green, your old wound, the one you got in that frontier skirmish in ’43, will begin to trouble you; on the eighth, your liver, undermined by years of curry, will drop to pieces; on the twelfth–“

“Oh, shut up, you ass!”

“Well, I’m only warning you. Hallo; good morning, Miss Norris. I was just telling the Major what was going to happen to you and him this morning. Do you want any assistance, or do you prefer choosing your own breakfast?”

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“Good morning. Going to be hot.”

“As I was telling him,” began Bill, “that’s where–Hallo, here’s Betty. Morning, Cayley.”

Betty Calladine and Cayley had come in together. Betty was the eighteen-year-old daughter of Mrs. John Calladine, widow of the painter, who was acting hostess on this occasion for Mark. Ruth Norris took herself seriously as an actress and, on her holidays, seriously as a golfer. She was quite competent as either. Neither the Stage Society nor Sandwich had any terrors for her.

“By the way, the car will be round at 10.30,” said Cayley, looking up from his letters. “You’re lunching there, and driving back directly afterwards. Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t have–two rounds,” said Bill hopefully.

“Much too hot in the afternoon,” said the Major. “Get back comfortably for tea.”

Mark came in. He was generally the last. He greeted them and sat down to toast and tea. Breakfast was not his meal. The others chattered gently while he read his letters.

“Good God!” said Mark suddenly.

There was an instinctive turning of heads towards him. “I beg your pardon, Miss Norris. Sorry, Betty.”

Miss Norris smiled her forgiveness. She often wanted to say it herself, particularly at rehearsals.

“I say, Cay!” He was frowning to himself–annoyed, puzzled. He held up a letter and shook it. “Who do you think this is from?”

Cayley, at the other end of the table, shrugged his shoulders. How could he possibly guess?

“Robert,” said Mark.

“Robert?” It was difficult to surprise Cayley. “Well?”

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“I thought he was in Australia, or somewhere.”

“Of course. So did I.” He looked across at Rumbold. “Got any brothers, Major?”

“No.”

“Well, take my advice, and don’t have any.”

“Not likely to now,” said the Major.

Bill laughed. Miss Norris said politely: “But you haven’t any brothers, Mr. Ablett?”

“One,” said Mark grimly. “If you’re back in time you’ll see him this afternoon. He’ll probably ask you to lend him five pounds. Don’t.”

Everybody felt a little uncomfortable.

“I’ve got a brother,” said Bill helpfully, “but I always borrow from him.”

“Like Robert,” said Mark.

“When was he in England last?” asked Cayley.

“About fifteen years ago, wasn’t it? You’d have been a boy, of course.”

“Yes, I remember seeing him once about then, but I didn’t know if he had been back since.”

“No. Not to my knowledge.” Mark, still obviously upset, returned to his letter.

“Personally,” said Bill, “I think relations are a great mistake.”

“All the same,” said Betty a little daringly, “it must be rather fun having a skeleton in the cupboard.”

Mark looked up, frowning.

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Cayley grunted.

“All I knew was that one didn’t ask questions about him.”

It may have been meant as a hint to any too curious guest not to ask more questions, or a reminder to his host not to talk too freely in front of strangers, although he gave it the sound of a mere statement of fact. But the subject dropped, to be succeeded by the more fascinating one of the coming foursome. Mrs. Calladine was driving over with the players in order to lunch with an old friend who lived near the links, and Mark and Cayley were remaining at home–on affairs. Apparently “affairs” were now to include a prodigal brother. But that need not make the foursome less enjoyable.

At about the time when the Major (for whatever reasons) was fluffing his tee-shot at the sixteenth, and Mark and his cousin were at their business at The Red House, an attractive gentleman of the name of Antony Gillingham was handing up his ticket at Woodham station and asking the way to the village. Having received directions, he left his bag with the station-master and walked off leisurely. He is an important person to this story, so that it is as well we should know something about him before letting him loose in it. Let us stop him at the top of the hill on some excuse, and have a good look at him.

The first thing we realize is that he is doing more of the looking than we are. Above a clean-cut, clean-shaven face, of the type usually associated with the Navy, he carries a pair of grey eyes which seem to be absorbing every detail of our person. To strangers this look is almost alarming at first, until they discover that his mind is very often elsewhere; that he has, so to speak, left his eyes on guard, while he himself follows a train of thought in another direction. Many people do this, of course; when, for instance, they are talking to one person and trying to listen to another; but their eyes betray them. Antony’s never did.

He had seen a good deal of the world with those eyes, though never as a sailor. When at the age of twenty-one he came into his mother’s money, 400 pounds a year, old Gillingham looked up from the “Stockbreeders’ Gazette” to ask what he was going to do.

“See the world,” said Antony.

“Well, send me a line from America, or wherever you get to.”

“Right,” said Antony.

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instance. But, then, Champion Birket was the best Hereford bull he had ever bred.

Antony, however, had no intention of going further away than London. His idea of seeing the world was to see, not countries, but people; and to see them from as many angles as possible. There are all sorts in London if you know how to look at them. So Antony looked at them–from various strange corners; from the view-point of the valet, the newspaper-reporter, the waiter, the shop-assistant. With the independence of 400 pounds a year behind him, he enjoyed it immensely. He never stayed long in one job, and generally closed his connection with it by telling his employer (contrary to all etiquette as understood between master and servant) exactly what he thought of him. He had no difficulty in finding a new profession. Instead of experience and testimonials he offered his personality and a sporting bet. He would take no wages the first month, and–if he satisfied his employer–double wages the second. He always got his double wages.

He was now thirty. He had come to Waldheim for a holiday, because he liked the look of the station. His ticket entitled him to travel further, but he had always intended to please himself in the matter. Waldheim attracted him, and he had a suit-case in the carriage with him and money in his pocket. Why not get out?

The landlady of “The George” was only too glad to put him up, and promised that her husband would drive over that afternoon for his luggage.

“And you would like some lunch, I expect, sir.”

“Yes, but don’t give yourself any trouble about it. Cold anything-you’ve-got.”

“What about beef, sir?” she asked, as if she had a hundred varieties of meat to select from, and was offering him her best.

“That will do splendidly. And a pint of beer.”

While he was finishing his lunch, the landlord came in to ask about the luggage. Antony ordered another pint, and soon had him talking.

“It must be rather fun to keep a country inn,” he said, thinking that it was about time he started another profession.

“I don’t know about fun, sir. It gives us a living, and a bit over.”

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“Funny thing your saying that,” said the landlord, with a smile. “Another gentleman, over from The Red House, was saying that only yesterday. Offered to take my place ‘n all.” He laughed rumblingly.

“The Red House? Not the Red House, Stanton?”

“That’s right, sir. Stanton’s the next station to Waldheim. The Red House is about a mile from here–Mr. Ablett’s.”

Antony took a letter from his pocket. It was addressed from “The Red House, Stanton,” and signed “Bill.”

“Good old Bill,” he murmured to himself. “He’s getting on.”

Antony had met Bill Beverley two years before in a tobacconist’s shop. Gillingham was on one side of the counter and Mr. Beverley on the other. Something about Bill, his youth and freshness, perhaps, attracted Antony; and when cigarettes had been ordered, and an address given to which they were to be sent, he remembered that he had come across an aunt of Beverley’s once at a country-house. Beverley and he met again a little later at a restaurant. Both of them were in evening-dress, but they did different things with their napkins, and Antony was the more polite of the two. However, he still liked Bill. So on one of his holidays, when he was unemployed, he arranged an introduction through a mutual friend. Beverley was a little inclined to be shocked when he was reminded of their previous meetings, but his uncomfortable feeling soon wore off, and he and Antony quickly became intimate. But Bill generally addressed him as “Dear Madman” when he happened to write.

Antony decided to stroll over to The Red House after lunch and call upon his friend. Having inspected his bedroom which was not quite the lavender-smelling country-inn bedroom of fiction, but sufficiently clean and comfortable, he set out over the fields.

As he came down the drive and approached the old red-brick front of the house, there was a lazy murmur of bees in the flower-borders, a gentle cooing of pigeons in the tops of the elms, and from distant lawns the whir of a mowing-machine, that most restful of all country sounds ....

And in the hall a man was banging at a locked door, and shouting, “Open the door, I say; open the door!”

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CHAPTER III. TWO MEN AND A BODY

Cayley looked round suddenly at the voice.

“Can I help?” said Antony politely.

“Something’s happened,” said Cayley. He was breathing quickly. “I heard a shot–it sounded like a shot–I was in the library. A loud bang–I didn’t know what it was. And the door’s locked.” He rattled the handle again, and shook it. “Open the door!” he cried. “I say, Mark, what is it? Open the door!”

“But he must have locked the door on purpose,” said Antony. “So why should he open it just because you ask him to?”

Cayley looked at him in a bewildered way. Then he turned to the door again. “We must break it in,” he said, putting his shoulder to it. “Help me.”

“Isn’t there a window?”

Cayley turned to him stupidly.

“Window? Window?”

“So much easier to break in a window,” said Antony with a smile. He looked very cool and collected, as he stood just inside the hall, leaning on his stick, and thinking, no doubt, that a great deal of fuss was being made about nothing. But then, he had not heard the shot.

“Window–of course! What an idiot I am.”

He pushed past Antony, and began running out into the drive. Antony followed him. They ran along the front of the house, down a path to the left, and then to the left again over the grass, Cayley in front, the other close behind him. Suddenly Cayley looked over his shoulder and pulled up short.

“Here,” he said.

They had come to the windows of the locked room, French windows which opened on to the lawns at the back of the house. But now they were closed. Antony couldn’t help feeling

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mysterious room. It had all seemed so absurd and melodramatic from the other side of the door. But if there had been one shot, why should there not be two more?–at the careless fools who were pressing their noses against the panes, and asking for it.

“My God, can you see it?” said Cayley in a shaking voice. “Down there. Look!”

The next moment Antony saw it. A man was lying on the floor at the far end of the room, his back towards them. A man? Or the body of a man?

“Who is it?” said Antony.

“I don’t know,” the other whispered.

“Well, we’d better go and see.” He considered the windows for a moment. “I should think, if you put your weight into it, just where they join, they’ll give all right. Otherwise, we can kick the glass in.”

Without saying anything, Cayley put his weight into it. The window gave, and they went into the room. Cayley walked quickly to the body, and dropped on his knees by it. For the moment he seemed to hesitate; then with an effort he put a hand on to its shoulder and pulled it over.

“Thank God!” he murmured, and let the body go again.

“Who is it?” said Antony.

“Robert Ablett.”

“Oh!” said Antony. “I thought his name was Mark,” he added, more to himself than to the other.

“Yes, Mark Ablett lives here. Robert is his brother.” He shuddered, and said, “I was afraid it was Mark.”

“Was Mark in the room too?”

“Yes,” said Cayley absently. Then, as if resenting suddenly these questions from a stranger, “Who are you?”

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“Who?”

Antony shrugged his shoulders.

“Whoever did this,” he said, pointing to the man on the floor. “Is he dead?”

“Help me,” said Cayley simply.

They turned the body on to its back, nerving themselves to look at it. Robert Ablett had been shot between the eyes. It was not a pleasant sight, and with his horror Antony felt a sudden pity for the man beside him, and a sudden remorse for the careless, easy way in which he had treated the affair. But then one always went about imagining that these things didn’t happen–except to other people. It was difficult to believe in them just at first, when they happened to yourself.

“Did you know him well?” said Antony quietly. He meant, “Were you fond of him?”

“Hardly at all. Mark is my cousin. I mean, Mark is the brother I know best.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yes.” He hesitated, and then said, “Is he dead? I suppose he is. Will you–do you know anything about–about that sort of thing? Perhaps I’d better get some water.”

There was another door opposite to the locked one, which led, as Antony was to discover for himself directly, into a passage from which opened two more rooms. Cayley stepped into the passage, and opened the door on the right. The door from the office, through which he had gone, remained open. The door, at the end of the short passage was shut. Antony, kneeling by the body, followed Cayley with his eyes, and, after he had disappeared, kept his eyes on the blank wall of the passage, but he was not conscious of that at which he was looking, for his mind was with the other man, sympathizing with him.

“Not that water is any use to a dead body,” he said to himself, “but the feeling that you’re doing something, when there’s obviously nothing to be done, is a great comfort.”

Cayley came into the room again. He had a sponge in one hand, a handkerchief in the other. He looked at Antony. Antony nodded. Cayley murmured something, and knelt down

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They stood up and looked at each other.

“If I can be of any help to you,” said Antony, “please let me.”

“That’s very kind of you. There will be things to do. Police, doctors–I don’t know. But you mustn’t let me trespass on your kindness. Indeed, I should apologise for having trespassed so much already.”

“I came to see Beverley. He is an old friend of mine.”

“He’s out playing golf. He will be back directly.” Then, as if he had only just realized it, “They will all be back directly.”

“I will stay if I can be of any help.”

“Please do. You see, there are women. It will be rather painful. If you would–” He hesitated, and gave Antony a timid little smile, pathetic in so big and self-reliant a man. “Just your moral support, you know. It would be something.”

“Of course.” Antony smiled back at him, and said cheerfully, “Well, then, I’ll begin by suggesting that you should ring up the police.”

“The police? Y-yes.” He looked doubtfully at the other. “I suppose–“

Antony spoke frankly.

“Now, look here, Mr–er–“

“Cayley. I’m Mark Ablett’s cousin. I live with him.”

“My name’s Gillingham. I’m sorry, I ought to have told you before. Well now, Mr. Cayley, we shan’t do any good by pretending. Here’s a man been shot–well, somebody shot him.”

“He might have shot himself,” mumbled Cayley.

“Yes, he might have, but he didn’t. Or if he did, somebody was in the room at the time, and that somebody isn’t here now. And that somebody took a revolver away with him. Well,

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Cayley was silent, looking on the ground.

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking, and believe me I do sympathize with you, but we can’t be children about it. If your cousin Mark Ablett was in the room with this”–he indicated the body–“this man, then–“

“Who said he was?” said Cayley, jerking his head up suddenly at Antony.

“You did.”

“I was in the library. Mark went in–he may have come out again –I know nothing. Somebody else may have gone in–“

“Yes, yes,” said Antony patiently, as if to a little child. “You know your cousin; I don’t. Let’s agree that he had nothing to do with it. But somebody was in the room when this man was shot, and–well, the police will have to know. Don’t you think–” He looked at the telephone. “Or would you rather I did it?”

Cayley shrugged his shoulders and went to the telephone.

“May I–er–look round a bit?” Antony nodded towards the open door.

“Oh, do. Yes.” He sat down and drew the telephone towards him. “You must make allowances for me, Mr. Gillingham. You see, I’ve known Mark for a very long time. But, of course, you’re quite right, and I’m merely being stupid.” He took off the receiver.

Let us suppose that, for the purpose of making a first acquaintance with this “office,” we are coming into it from the hall, through the door which is now locked, but which, for our special convenience, has been magically unlocked for us. As we stand just inside the door, the length of the room runs right and left; or, more accurately, to the right only, for the left-hand wall is almost within our reach. Immediately opposite to us, across the breadth of the room (some fifteen feet), is that other door, by which Cayley went out and returned a few minutes ago. In the right-hand wall, thirty feet away from us, are the French windows. Crossing the room and going out by the opposite door, we come into a passage, from which two rooms lead. The one on the right, into which Cayley went, is less than half the length of the office, a small, square room, which has evidently been used some time or other as a bedroom. The bed is no longer there, but there is a basin, with hot and cold taps, in a corner; chairs; a cupboard or two, and a chest of drawers. The

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of the office, which projects, by reason of its greater length, fifteen feet further into the lawn.

The room on the other side of the bedroom is a bathroom. The three rooms together, in fact, form a sort of private suite; used, perhaps, during the occupation of the previous owner, by some invalid, who could not manage the stairs, but allowed by Mark to fall into disuse, save for the living-room. At any rate, he never slept downstairs.

Antony glanced at the bathroom, and then wandered into the bedroom, the room into which Cayley had been. The window was open, and he looked out at the well-kept grass beneath him, and the peaceful stretch of park beyond; and he felt very sorry for the owner of it all, who was now mixed up in so grim a business.

“Cayley thinks he did it,” said Antony to himself. “That’s obvious. It explains why he wasted so much time banging on the door. Why should he try to break a lock when it’s so much easier to break a window? Of course he might just have lost his head; on the other hand, he might–well, he might have wanted to give his cousin a chance of getting away. The same about the police, and–oh, lots of things. Why, for instance, did we run all the way round the house in order to get to the windows? Surely there’s a back way out through the hall. I must have a look later on.”

Antony, it will be observed, had by no means lost his head.

There was a step in the passage outside, and he turned round, to see Cayley in the doorway. He remained looking at him for a moment, asking himself a question. It was rather a curious question. He was asking himself why the door was open.

Well, not exactly why the door was open; that could be explained easily enough. But why had he expected the door to be shut? He did not remember shutting it, but somehow he was surprised to see it open now, to see Cayley through the doorway, just coming into the room. Something working sub-consciously in his brain had told him that it was surprising. Why?

He tucked the matter away in a corner of his mind for the moment; the answer would come to him later on. He had a wonderfully retentive mind. Everything which he saw or heard seemed to make its corresponding impression somewhere in his brain; often without his being conscious of it; and these photographic impressions were always there ready for him when he wished to develop them.

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“I’ve telephoned,” he said. “They’re sending an inspector or some one from Middleston, and the local police and doctor from Stanton.” He shrugged his shoulders. “We’re in for it now.”

“How far away is Middleston?” It was the town for which Antony had taken a ticket that morning–only six hours ago. How absurd it seemed.

“About twenty miles. These people will be coming back soon.

“Beverley, and the others?”

“Yes. I expect they’ll want to go away at once.”

“Much better that they should.”

“Yes.” Cayley was silent for a little. Then he said, “You’re staying near here?”

“I’m at ‘The George,’ at Waldheim.”

“If you’re by yourself, I wish you’d put up here. You see,” he went on awkwardly, “you’ll have to be here–for the–the inquest and–and so on. If I may offer you my cousin’s hospitality in his–I mean if he doesn’t–if he really has–“

Antony broke in hastily with his thanks and acceptance.

“That’s good. Perhaps Beverley will stay on, if he’s a friend of yours. He’s a good fellow.”

Antony felt quite sure, from what Cayley had said and had hesitated to say, that Mark had been the last to see his brother alive. It didn’t follow that Mark Ablett was a murderer. Revolvers go off accidentally; and when they have gone off, people lose their heads and run away, fearing that their story will not be believed. Nevertheless, when people run away, whether innocently or guiltily, one can’t help wondering which way they went.

“I suppose this way,” said Antony aloud, looking out of the window.

“Who?” said Cayley stubbornly.

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“I wonder.”

“Well, how else could he have got away? He didn’t go by the windows in the next room, because they were shut.”

“Isn’t that rather odd?”

“Well, I thought so at first, but–” He pointed to the wall jutting out on the right. “You see, you’re protected from the rest of the house if you get out here, and you’re quite close to the shrubbery. If you go out at the French windows, I imagine you’re much more visible. All that part of the house–” he waved his right hand–“the west, well, north-west almost, where the kitchen parts are–you see, you’re hidden from them here. Oh, yes! he knew the house, whoever it was, and he was quite right to come out of this window. He’d be into the shrubbery at once.”

Cayley looked at him thoughtfully.

“It seems to me, Mr. Gillingham, that you know the house pretty well, considering that this is the first time you’ve been to it.”

Antony laughed.

“Oh, well, I notice things, you know. I was born noticing. But I’m right, aren’t I, about why he went out this way?”

“Yes, I think you are.” Cayley looked away–towards the shrubbery. “Do you want to go noticing in there now?” He nodded at it.

“I think we might leave that to the police,” said Antony gently. “It’s–well, there’s no hurry.”

Cayley gave a little sigh, as if he had been holding his breath for the answer, and could now breathe again.

“Thank you, Mr. Gillingham,” he said.

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AUSTRALIA

Guests at the Red House were allowed to do what they liked within reason–the reasonableness or otherwise of it being decided by Mark. But when once they (or Mark) had made up their minds as to what they wanted to do, the plan had to be kept. Mrs. Calladine, who knew this little weakness of their host's, resisted, therefore, the suggestion of Bill that they should have a second round in the afternoon, and drive home comfortably after tea. The other golfers were willing enough, but Mrs. Calladine, without actually saying that Mr. Ablett wouldn't like it, was firm on the point that, having arranged to be back by four, they should be back by four.

"I really don't think Mark wants us, you know," said the Major. Having played badly in the morning, he wanted to prove to himself in the afternoon that he was really better than that. "With this brother of his coming, he'll be only too glad to have us out of the way."

"Of course he will, Major." This from Bill. "You'd like to play, wouldn't you, Miss Norris?"

Miss Norris looked doubtfully at the hostess.

"Of course, if you want to get back, dear, we mustn't keep you here. Besides, it's so dull for you, not playing."

"Just nine holes, mother," pleaded Betty.

"The car could take you back, and you could tell them that we were having another round, and then it could come back for us," said Bill brilliantly.

"It's certainly much cooler here than I expected," put in the Major.

Mrs. Calladine fell. It was very pleasantly cool outside the golf-house, and of course Mark would be rather glad to have them out of the way. So she consented to nine holes; and the match having ended all-square, and everybody having played much better than in the morning, they drove back to The Red House, very well pleased with themselves.

"Halo," said Bill to himself, as they approached the house, "isn't that old Tony?"

Antony was standing in front of the house, waiting for them. Bill waved, and he waved back. Then as the car drew up, Bill, who was in front with the chauffeur, jumped down and

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“Hallo, you madman, have you come to stay, or what?” He had a sudden idea. “Don’t say you’re Mark Ablett’s long-lost brother from Australia, though I could quite believe it of you.” He laughed boyishly.

“Hallo, Bill,” said Antony quietly. “Will you introduce me? I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

Bill, rather sobered by this, introduced him. The Major and Mrs. Calladine were on the near side of the car, and Antony spoke to them in a low voice.

“I’m afraid I’m going to give you rather a shock,” he said. “Robert Ablett, Mr. Mark Ablett’s brother, has been killed.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, “In the house.”

“Good God!” said the Major.

“Do you mean that he has killed himself?” asked Mrs. Calladine. “Just now?”

“It was about two hours ago. I happened to come here,”–he half-turned to Beverley and explained–“I was coming to see you, Bill, and I arrived just after the–the death. Mr. Cayley and I found the body. Mr. Cayley being busy just now–there are police and doctors and so on in the house–he asked me to tell you. He says that no doubt you would prefer, the house-party having been broken up in this tragic way, to leave as soon as possible.” He gave a pleasant apologetic little smile and went on, “I am putting it badly, but what he means, of course, is that you must consult your own feelings in the matter entirely, and please make your own arrangements about ordering the car for whatever train you wish to catch. There is one this evening, I understand, which you could go by if you wished it.”

Bill gazed with open mouth at Antony. He had no words in his vocabulary to express what he wanted to say, other than those the Major had already used. Betty was leaning across to Miss Norris and saying, “Who’s killed?” in an awe-struck voice, and Miss Norris, who was instinctively looking as tragic as she looked on the stage when a messenger announced the death of one of the cast, stopped for a moment in order to explain. Mrs. Calladine was quietly mistress of herself.

“We shall be in the way, yes, I quite understand,” she said; “but we can’t just shake the dust of the place off our shoes because something terrible has happened there. I must see Mark, and we can arrange later what to do. He must know how very deeply we feel for him. Perhaps we–” she hesitated.

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“Where is Mark?” said the Major suddenly, looking hard at Antony.

Antony looked back unwaveringly–and said nothing.

“I think,” said the Major gently, leaning over to Mrs. Calladine, “that it would be better if you took Betty back to London to-night.”

“Very well,” she agreed quietly. “You will come with us, Ruth?”

“I’ll see you safely there,” said Bill in a meek voice. He didn’t quite know what was happening, and, having expected to stay at the Red House for another week, he had nowhere to go to in London, but London seemed to be the place that everyone was going to, and when he could get Tony alone for a moment, Tony no doubt would explain.

“Cayley wants you to stay, Bill. You have to go anyhow, to-morrow, Major Rumbold?”

“Yes. I’ll come with you, Mrs. Calladine.”

“Mr. Cayley would wish me to say again that you will please not hesitate to give your own orders, both as regard the car and as regard any telephoning or telegraphing that you want done.” He smiled again and added, “Please forgive me if I seem to have taken a good deal upon myself, but I just happened to be handy as a mouthpiece for Cayley.” He bowed to them and went into the house.

“Well!” said Miss Norris dramatically.

As Antony re-entered the hall, the Inspector from Middleston was just crossing into the library with Cayley. The latter stopped and nodded to Antony.

“Wait a moment, Inspector. Here’s Mr. Gillingham. He’d better come with us.” And then to Antony, “This is Inspector Birch.”

Birch looked inquiringly from one to the other.

“Mr. Gillingham and I found the body together,” explained Cayley.

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“We all do.”

“Oh!” He looked at Antony with interest. “D’you know where you are in this case?”

“I know where I’m going to be.”

“Where’s that?”

“Put through it by Inspector Birch,” said Antony with a smile.

The inspector laughed genially.

“Well, I’ll spare you as much as I can. Come along.”

They went into the library. The inspector seated himself at a writing-table, and Cayley sat in a chair by the side of it. Antony made himself comfortable in an armchair and prepared to be interested.

“We’ll start with the dead man,” said the inspector. “Robert Ablett, didn’t you say?” He took out his notebook.

“Yes. Brother of Mark Ablett, who lives here.”

“Ah!” He began to sharpen a pencil. “Staying in the house?”

“Oh, no!”

Antony listened attentively while Cayley explained all that he knew about Robert. This was news to him. “I see. Sent out of the country in disgrace. What had he done?”

“I hardly know. I was only about twelve at the time. The sort of age when you’re told not to ask questions.”

“Inconvenient questions?”

“Exactly.”

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“No. Old Mr. Ablett was a clergyman,” added Cayley. “Perhaps what might seem wicked to a clergyman might seem only wild to a man of the world.”

“I daresay, Mr. Cayley,” smiled the inspector. “Anyhow, it was more convenient to have him in Australia?”

“Yes.”

“Mark Ablett never talked about him?”

“Hardly ever. He was very much ashamed of him, and–well, very glad he was in Australia.”

“Did he write Mark sometimes?”

“Occasionally. Perhaps three or four times in the last five years.”

“Asking for money?”

“Something of the sort. I don’t think Mark always answered them. As far as I know, he never sent any money.”

“Now your own private opinion, Mr. Cayley. Do you think that Mark was unfair to his brother? Unduly hard on him?”

“They’d never liked each other as boys. There was never any affection between them. I don’t know whose fault it was in the first place–if anybody’s.”

“Still, Mark might have given him a hand?”

“I understand,” said Cayley, “that Robert spent his whole life asking for hands.”

The inspector nodded.

“I know that sort. Well, now, we’ll go on to this morning. This letter that Mark got–did you see it?”

“Not at the time. He showed it to me afterwards.”

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“No. A half-sheet of rather dirty paper.”

“Where is it now?”

“I don’t know. In Mark’s pocket, I expect.”

“Ah!” He pulled at his beard. “Well, we’ll come to that. Can you remember what it said?”

“As far as I remember, something like this: ‘Mark, your loving brother is coming to see you to-morrow, all the way from Australia. I give you warning so that you will be able to conceal your surprise, but not I hope, your pleasure. Expect him at three, or thereabouts.'”

“Ah!” The inspector copied it down carefully. “Did you notice the postmark?”

“London.”

“And what was Mark’s attitude?”

“Annoyance, disgust–” Cayley hesitated.

“Apprehension?”

“N-no, not exactly. Or, rather, apprehension of an unpleasant interview, not of any unpleasant outcome for himself.”

“You mean that he wasn’t afraid of violence, or blackmail, or anything of that sort?”

“He didn’t appear to be.”

“Right . . . . Now then, he arrived, you say, about three o’clock?”

“Yes, about that.”

“Who was in the house then?”

“Mark and myself, and some of the servants. I don’t know which. Of course, you will ask them directly, no doubt.”

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"They were out all day playing golf," explained Cayley. "Oh, by the way," he put in, "if I may interrupt a moment, will you want to see them at all? It isn't very pleasant for them now, naturally, and I suggested–" he turned to Antony, who nodded back to him. "I understand that they want to go back to London this evening. There's no objection to that, I suppose?"

"You will let me have their names and addresses in case I want to communicate with them?"

"Of course. One of them is staying on, if you would like to see him later, but they only came back from their golf as we crossed the hall."

"That's all right, Mr. Cayley. Well, now then, let's go back to three o'clock. Where were you when Robert arrived?"

Cayley explained how he had been sitting in the hall, how Audrey had asked him where the master was, and how he had said that he had last seen him going up to the Temple.

"She went away, and I went on with my book. There was a step on the stairs, and I looked up to see Mark coming down. He went into the office, and I went on with my book again. I went into the library for a moment, to refer to another book, and when I was in there I heard a shot. At least, it was a loud bang, I wasn't sure if it was a shot. I stood and listened. Then I came slowly to the door and looked out. Then I went back again, hesitated a bit, you know, and finally decided to go across to the office, and make sure that it was all right. I turned the handle of the door and found it was locked. Then I got frightened, and I banged at the door, and shouted, and–well, that was when Mr. Gillingham arrived." He went on to explain how they had found the body.

The inspector looked at him with a smile.

"Yes, well, we shall have to go over some of that again, Mr. Cayley. Mr. Mark, now. You thought he was in the Temple. Could he have come in, and gone up to his room, without your seeing him?"

"There are back stairs. He wouldn't have used them in the ordinary way, of course. But I wasn't in the hall all the afternoon. He might easily have gone upstairs without my knowing anything about it."

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“Oh, not a bit.”

“Well, did he say anything?”

“He said, ‘Robert’s here?’ or something of the sort. I suppose he’d heard the bell, or the voices in the hall.”

“Which way does his bedroom face? Could he have seen him coming down the drive?”

“He might have, yes.”

“Well?”

“Well, then, I said ‘Yes,’ and he gave a sort of shrug, and said, ‘Don’t go too far away, I might want you’; and then went in.”

“What did you think he meant by that?”

“Well, he consults me a good deal, you know. I’m his sort of unofficial solicitor in a kind of way.”

“This was a business meeting rather than a brotherly one?”

“Oh, yes. That’s how he regarded it, I’m sure.”

“Yes. How long was it before you heard the shot?”

“Very soon. Two minutes, perhaps.”

The inspector finished his writing, and then regarded Cayley thoughtfully. Suddenly he said:

“What is your theory of Robert’s death?”

Cayley shrugged his shoulders.

“You’ve probably seen more than I’ve seen,” he answered. “It’s your job. I can only speak as a layman–and Mark’s friend.”

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“Then I should say that Robert came here meaning trouble, and bringing a revolver with him. He produced it almost at once, Mark tried to get it from him, there was a little struggle perhaps, and it went off. Mark lost his head, finding himself there with a revolver in his hand and a dead man at his feet. His one idea was to escape. He locked the door almost instinctively, and then, when he heard me hammering at it, went out of the window.”

“Y-yes. Well, that sounds reasonable enough. What do you say, Mr. Gillingham?”

“I should hardly call it ‘reasonable’ to lose your head,” said Antony, getting up from his chair and coming towards them.

“Well, you know what I mean. It explains things.”

“Oh, yes. Any other explanation would make them much more complicated.”

“Have you any other explanation?”

“Not I.”

“Are there any points on which you would like to correct Mr. Cayley?–anything that he left out after you arrived here?”

“No, thanks. He described it all very accurately.”

“Ah! Well now, about yourself. You’re not staying in the house, I gather?”

Antony explained his previous movements.

“Yes. Did you hear the shot?”

Antony put his head on one side, as if listening. “Yes. Just as I came in sight of the house. It didn’t make any impression at the time, but I remember it now.”

“Where were you then?”

“Coming up the drive. I was just in sight of the house.”

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Antony closed his eyes and considered.

“Nobody,” he said. “No.”

“You’re certain of that?”

“Absolutely,” said Antony, as though rather surprised that he could be suspected of a mistake.

“Thank you. You’re at ‘The George,’ if I want you?”

“Mr. Gillingham is staying here until after the inquest,” explained Cayley.

“Good. Well now, about these servants?”

CHAPTER V. MR. GILLINGHAM CHOOSES A NEW PROFESSION

As Cayley went over to the bell, Antony got up and moved to the door.

“Well, you won’t want me, I suppose, inspector,” he said.

“No, thank you, Mr. Gillingham. You’ll be about, of course?”

“Oh, yes.”

The inspector hesitated.

“I think, Mr. Cayley, it would be better if I saw the servants alone. You know what they are; the more people about, the more they get alarmed. I expect I can get at the truth better by myself.”

“Oh, quite so. In fact, I was going to ask you to excuse me. I feel rather responsible towards these guests of ours. Although Mr. Gillingham very kindly–” He smiled at Antony, who was waiting at the door, and left his sentence unfinished.

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“Yes; would you like to see him?”

“Afterwards, if I may.”

“I’ll warn him. I shall be up in my room, if you want me. I have a room upstairs where I work–any of the servants will show you. Ah, Stevens, Inspector Birch would like to ask you a few questions.”

“Yes, sir,” said Audrey primly, but inwardly fluttering. The housekeeper’s room had heard something of the news by this time, and Audrey had had a busy time explaining to other members of the staff exactly what he had said, and what she had said. The details were not quite established yet, but this much at least was certain: that Mr. Mark’s brother had shot himself and spirited Mr. Mark away, and that Audrey had seen at once that he was that sort of man when she opened the door to him. She had passed the remark to Mrs. Stevens. And Mrs. Stevens–if you remember, Audrey–had always said that people didn’t go away to Australia except for very good reasons. Elsie agreed with both of them, but she had a contribution of her own to make. She had actually heard Mr. Mark in the office, threatening his brother.

“You mean Mr. Robert,” said the second parlour-maid. She had been having a little nap in her room, but she had heard the bang. In fact, it had woken her up–just like something going off, it was.

“It was Mr. Mark’s voice,” said Elsie firmly.

“Pleading for mercy,” said an eager-eyed kitchen-maid hopefully from the door, and was hurried out again by the others, wishing that she had not given her presence away. But it was hard to listen in silence when she knew so well from her novelettes just what happened on these occasions.

“I shall have to give that girl a piece of my mind,” said Mrs. Stevens. “Well, Elsie?”

“He said, I heard him say it with my own ears, ‘It’s my turn now,’ he said, triumphant-like.”

“Well, if you think that’s a threat, dear, you’re very particular, I must say.”

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and was examined and cross-examined by the inspector with considerable skill. The temptation to say, “Never mind about what you said to him,” was strong, but he resisted it, knowing that in this way he would discover best what he said to her. By this time both his words and the looks he gave her were getting their full value from Audrey, but the general meaning of them seemed to be well-established.

“Then you didn’t see Mr. Mark at all”

“No, sir; he must have come in before and gone up to his room. Or come in by the front door, likely enough, while I was going out by the back.”

“Yes. Well, I think that’s all that I want to know, thank you very much. Now what about the other servants?”

“Elsie heard the master and Mr. Robert talking together,” said Audrey eagerly. “He was saying–Mr. Mark, I mean–“

“Ah! Well, I think Elsie had better tell me that herself. Who is Elsie, by the way?”

“One of the housemaids. Shall I send her to you, sir?”

“Please.”

Elsie was not sorry to get the message. It interrupted a few remarks from Mrs. Stevens about Elsie’s conduct that afternoon which were (Elsie thought) much better interrupted. In Mrs. Stevens’ opinion any crime committed that afternoon in the office was as nothing to the double crime committed by the unhappy Elsie.

For Elsie realized too late that she would have done better to have said nothing about her presence in the hall that afternoon. She was bad at concealing the truth and Mrs. Stevens was good at discovering it. Elsie knew perfectly well that she had no business to come down the front stairs, and it was no excuse to say that she happened to come out of Miss Norris’ room just at the head of the stairs, and didn’t think it would matter, as there was nobody in the hall, and what was she doing anyhow in Miss Norris’ room at that time? Returning a magazine? Lent by Miss Norris, might she ask? Well, not exactly lent. Really, Elsie!–and this in a respectable house! In vain for poor Elsie to plead that a story by her favourite author was advertised on the cover, with a picture of the villain falling over the cliff. “That’s where you’ll go to, my girl, if you aren’t careful,” said Mrs. Stevens firmly.

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“And stopped to listen?”

“Certainly not,” said Elsie with dignity, feeling that nobody really understood her. “I was just passing through the hall, just as you might have been yourself, and not supposing they was talking secrets, didn’t think to stop my ears, as no doubt I ought to have done.” And she sniffed slightly.

“Come, come,” said the inspector soothingly, “I didn’t mean to suggest–“

“Everyone is very unkind to me,” said Elsie between sniffs, “and there’s that poor man lying dead there, and sorry they’d have been, if it had been me, to have spoken to me as they have done this day.”

“Nonsense, we’re going to be very proud of you. I shouldn’t be surprised if your evidence were of very great importance. Now then, what was it you heard? Try to remember the exact words.”

Something about working in a passage, thought Elsie.

“Yes, but who said it?”

“Mr. Robert.”

“How do you know it was Mr. Robert? Had you heard his voice before?”

“I don’t take it upon myself to say that I had had any acquaintance with Mr. Robert, but seeing that it wasn’t Mr. Mark, nor yet Mr. Cayley, nor any other of the gentlemen, and Miss Stevens had shown Mr. Robert into the office not five minutes before–“

“Quite so,” said the inspector hurriedly. “Mr. Robert, undoubtedly. Working in a passage?”

“That was what it sounded like, sir.”

“H’m. Working a passage over–could that have been it?”

“That’s right, sir,” said Elsie eagerly. “He’d worked his passage over.”

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“And then Mr. Mark said loudly–sort of triumphant-like–‘It’s my turn now. You wait.'”

“Triumphantly?”

“As much as to say his chance had come.”

“And that’s all you heard?”

“That’s all, sir–not standing there listening, but just passing through the hall, as it might be any time.”

“Yes. Well, that’s really very important, Elsie. Thank you.”

Elsie gave him a smile, and returned eagerly to the kitchen. She was ready for Mrs. Stevens or anybody now.

Meanwhile Antony had been exploring a little on his own. There was a point which was puzzling him. He went through the hall to the front of the house and stood at the open door, looking out on to the drive. He and Cayley had run round the house to the left. Surely it would have been quicker to have run round to the right? The front door was not in the middle of the house, it was to the end. Undoubtedly they went the longest way round. But perhaps there was something in the way, if one went to the right–a wall, say. He strolled off in that direction, followed a path round the house and came in sight of the office windows. Quite simple, and about half the distance of the other way. He went on a little farther, and came to a door, just beyond the broken-in windows. It opened easily, and he found himself in a passage. At the end of the passage was another door. He opened it and found himself in the hall again.

“And, of course, that’s the quickest way of the three,” he said to himself. “Through the hall, and out at the back; turn to the left and there you are. Instead of which, we ran the longest way round the house. Why? Was it to give Mark more time in which to escape? Only, in that case–why run? Also, how did Cayley know then that it was Mark who was trying to escape? If he had guessed–well, not guessed, but been afraid–that one had shot the other, it was much more likely that Robert had shot Mark. Indeed, he had admitted that this was what he thought. The first thing he had said when he turned the body over was, ‘Thank God! I was afraid it was Mark.’ But why should he want to give Robert time in which to get away? And again–why run, if he did want to give him time?”

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"Now then," he said, "let's go through Cayley's mind carefully, and see what we get."

Cayley had been in the hall when Robert was shown into the office. The servant goes off to look for Mark, and Cayley goes on with his book. Mark comes down the stairs, warns Cayley to stand by in case he is wanted, and goes to meet his brother. What does Cayley expect? Possibly that he won't be wanted at all; possibly that his advice may be wanted in the matter, say, of paying Robert's debts, or getting him a passage back to Australia; possibly that his physical assistance may be wanted to get an obstreperous Robert out of the house. Well, he sits there for a moment, and then goes into the library. Why not? He is still within reach, if wanted. Suddenly he hears a pistol-shot. A pistol-shot is the last noise you expect to hear in a country-house; very natural, then, that for the moment he would hardly realize what it was. He listens–and hears nothing more. Perhaps it wasn't a pistol-shot after all. After a moment or two he goes to the library door again. The profound silence makes him uneasy now. Was it a pistol-shot? Absurd! Still–no harm in going into the office on some excuse, just to reassure himself. So he tries the door–and finds it locked!

What are his emotions now? Alarm, uncertainty. Something is happening. Incredible though it seems, it must have been a pistol-shot. He is banging at the door and calling out to Mark, and there is no answer. Alarm–yes. But alarm for whose safety? Mark's, obviously. Robert is a stranger; Mark is an intimate friend. Robert has written a letter that morning, the letter of a man in a dangerous temper. Robert is the tough customer; Mark the highly civilized gentleman. If there has been a quarrel, it is Robert who has shot Mark. He bangs at the door again.

Of course, to Antony, coming suddenly upon this scene, Cayley's conduct had seemed rather absurd, but then, just for the moment, Cayley had lost his head. Anybody else might have done the same. But, as soon as Antony suggested trying the windows, Cayley saw that that was the obvious thing to do. So he leads the way to the windows–the longest way.

Why? To give the murderer time to escape? If he had thought then that Mark was the murderer, perhaps, yes. But he thinks that Robert is the murderer. If he is not hiding anything, he must think so. Indeed he says so, when he sees the body; "I was afraid it was Mark," he says, when he finds that it is Robert who is killed. No reason, then, for wishing to gain time. On the contrary, every instinct would urge him to get into the room as quickly as possible, and seize the wicked Robert. Yet he goes the longest way round. Why? And then, why run?

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close to Robert's revolver, and yet wanted me to think that he was bursting with eagerness. That would explain it, but then that makes Cayley out a coward. Is he? At any rate he pushed his face up against the window bravely enough. No, I want a better answer than that."

He sat there with his unlit pipe in his hand, thinking. There were one or two other things in the back of his brain, waiting to be taken out and looked at. For the moment he left them undisturbed. They would come back to him later when he wanted them.

He laughed suddenly, and lit his pipe.

"I was wanting a new profession," he thought, "and now I've found it. Antony Gillingham, our own private sleuthhound. I shall begin to-day."

Whatever Antony Gillingham's other qualifications for his new profession, he had at any rate a brain which worked clearly and quickly. And this clear brain of his had already told him that he was the only person in the house at that moment who was unhandicapped in the search for truth. The inspector had arrived in it to find a man dead and a man missing. It was extremely probable, no doubt, that the missing man had shot the dead man. But it was more than extremely probable, it was almost certain that the inspector would start with the idea that this extremely probable solution was the one true solution, and that, in consequence, he would be less disposed to consider without prejudice any other solution. As regards all the rest of them –Cayley, the guests, the servants–they also were prejudiced; in favour of Mark (or possibly, for all he knew, against Mark); in favour of, or against, each other; they had formed some previous opinion, from what had been said that morning, of the sort of man Robert was. No one of them could consider the matter with an unbiased mind.

But Antony could. He knew nothing about Mark; he knew nothing about Robert. He had seen the dead man before he was told who the dead man was. He knew that a tragedy had happened before he knew that anybody was missing. Those first impressions, which are so vitally important, had been received solely on the merits of the case; they were founded on the evidence of his senses, not on the evidence of his emotions or of other people's senses. He was in a much better position for getting at the truth than was the inspector.

It is possible that, in thinking this, Antony was doing Inspector Birch a slight injustice. Birch was certainly prepared to believe that Mark had shot his brother. Robert had been

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the room had been entered and Robert's body had been found (witness Cayley and Gillingham). And Mark was missing. Obviously, then, Mark had killed his brother: accidentally, as Cayley believed, or deliberately, as Elsie's evidence seemed to suggest. There was no point in looking for a difficult solution to a problem, when the easy solution had no flaw in it. But at the same time Birch would have preferred the difficult solution, simply because there was more credit attached to it. A "sensational" arrest of somebody in the house would have given him more pleasure than a commonplace pursuit of Mark Ablett across country. Mark must be found, guilty or not guilty. But there were other possibilities. It would have interested Antony to know that, just at the time when he was feeling rather superior to the prejudiced inspector, the inspector himself was letting his mind dwell lovingly upon the possibilities in connection with Mr. Gillingham. Was it only a coincidence that Mr. Gillingham had turned up just when he did? And Mr. Beverley's curious answers when asked for some account of his friend. An assistant in a tobacconist's, a waiter! An odd man, Mr. Gillingham, evidently. It might be as well to keep an eye on him.

CHAPTER VI. OUTSIDE OR INSIDE?

The guests had said good-bye to Cayley, according to their different manner. The Major, gruff and simple: "If you want me, command me. Anything I can do–Good-bye"; Betty, silently sympathetic, with everything in her large eyes which she was too much overawed to tell; Mrs. Calladine, protesting that she did not know what to say, but apparently finding plenty; and Miss Norris, crowding so much into one despairing gesture that Cayley's unvarying "Thank you very much" might have been taken this time as gratitude for an artistic entertainment.

Bill had seen them into the car, had taken his own farewells (with a special squeeze of the hand for Betty), and had wandered

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